Mother's Menus

Mother must have been a good cook, or at least a dedicated one – my sister Penny tells us of how Mother began on Page 1 of the Betty Crocker cookbook and worked her way through. What I recall is that in those computer-free days of the 50s she would take a selection of leftovers and create a new meal. One time she shocked even me, when corn ended up in the Sunday brunch. I confronted her: "Mother, there is corn in these pancakes!" "Well, it's good for you!" was the answer. How could I argue with that?

That was the one meal that our father cooked: Sunday morning waffles (or pancakes). Mother put the batter together from Aunt Jemima pancake and waffle mix, and Dad fired up the square waffle iron and started the assembly line. We four kids did our part by smearing on the butter (or rather, margarine – I don't recall we ever used butter, it was margarine forever) and pouring on the Log Cabin syrup.

Much, much earlier in my eating memories is my war years' recollection of being assigned the task of breaking the color capsule in the plastic white margarine package and massaging the yellow dye until it all looked uniform. Then it was cut open and squeezed into a butter mold or a bowl on the table. This bizarre part of butter history came about from the powerful American dairy lobby:[1]

> Those who were children in the 1940s remember the triumph of margarine. It was often their job, after all, to turn the white, lard-like stuff into something resembling edible. "You got a little capsule that you broke that had yellow color in it, and you mixed it in to make it look like you had yellow spread," recalled a wartime resident of New Jersey.
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> As production increased over the years since the early 20th century, prices dropped and margarine looked to become a popular, low-cost alternative to butter. This possibility caught the attention of the American dairy industry, which did what any industry would do in the same situation: it lobbied politicians to protect its economic turf. The industry launched a propaganda campaign that ran strong for decades, paying off in the form of federal and state laws that did everything from banning the sale of margarine to requiring it to be dyed black.
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> Courts shot down the most egregious of those laws, but the ones that survived for the long haul—taxes and coloring bans—did a lot of damage. The ostensible reason behind outlawing artificial yellow color in margarine was that it was designed to fool consumers into believing they were buying and using genuine butter. There was a kernel of truth to this exaggeration: some unscrupulous bulk dealers of margarine did try to pass off yellow margarine as butter. But

[1] http://www.americainwwii.com/articles/victorys-spread/, retrieved 26 Oct 2017.

> the real reason behind the dairy industry's push for coloring bans was that a butter substitute that looked like lard was not going to win over potential buyers who wanted something appetizing to spread on their bread. By 1895, 19 states had adopted laws forbidding the sale of yellow margarine; by 1932, that number had risen to 27. Soon, margarine sales in America had fallen to half their peak.

In a clever work-around of the anti-coloring laws, margarine makers began packaging artificial yellow coloring in capsules or wafers with their white product. These do-it-yourself kits for consumers were a success. Now that margarine could promise a fairly appetizing appearance, all that was necessary for sales to take off was for WWII rationing to take its prime competitor all but out of the picture. Positive health-related findings announced at the National Nutrition Conference in 1941 didn't hurt, either. Soon much of America was using margarine in lieu of butter at least some of the time.

Not everyone applauded this culinary development. Margarine's most vocal detractors may have been the children who had to mix in the coloring. "I used to hate the icky margarine squeezing out between my fingers," recalled Betsy of Herkimer, New York. "When the war ended it was like a miracle not to have to mix margarine, and to a kid that was something to rave about." Plenty of people objected to the flavor of margarine, too. "It was sort of a dirty word in our house," wrote Helen Wheatley of Norway, New York.

> By the time the war ended, margarine was well established in the American market. Federal and state bans, taxes, and licenses began to fall by the wayside. By 1955, only two states still had laws forbidding the sale of yellow margarine. The last coloring ban stood all the way to 1967. The lone holdout? Wisconsin. Any state known as America's Dairyland might have been expected to fight so doggedly over the stuff that buttered its bread.

Mother's menus seemed to include a plethora of casseroles – I can't describe all the casseroles, but I think there was a spaghetti casserole or two in the mix, with cheese on top. Mother's specialties, though, were salmon croquettes, and Boston baked beans. The latter had to come from Mother's childhood in Ware, MA, and were always served in that special Boston Baked Bean Pot. Penny claimed that Mother never divulged the recipe for her famous Boston Baked Beans, but nowadays Bush's makes a pretty good facsimile. Plenty of molasses is what I thought made them special – like candy to the senses. In our later days, mother's menus devolved into battered fish sticks from a package. But she did do salmon cakes from time to time.

We kids always ate at the kitchen table; when Dad was home for the dinner meal, we would move to the dining room table. All holiday meals were always at the dining room table; Penn told the story of the 'back-up turkey' that Mother produced after Dad had slopped (some day "dropped") the 'original turkey' onto the dining room floor.

We kids always drank milk at meals – they didn't have skim milk in the 50s on a regular basis, so it had to be whole milk, delivered to the kitchen door off the driveway at 2307 Gramercy Blvd by the milkman. Chocolate milk was a great treat. I was also amazed that mother could write "cottage cheese" on a slip of paper and put it in an empty milk bottle, and bingo! Cottage cheese would appear in the milk carton! And even stranger, my sister Penny would obtain – and drink – buttermilk! Ugh! I tried it once – how could she drink that stuff? But the cottage cheese we all ate, mine with strawberry preserves on top.

The one menu that Mom did not create was desserts. Our Houston home was pretty much without any sweets, except cake and ice cream for the birthday parties. Since Patti and Penny were twins, I even lost out on that – only one cake for two big sisters. However, for the big 20th, they got their fair share, says Penny:

> "April 8, 1956: We're celebrating our birthday at 12:30. Two beautiful cakes and ice cream too. Daddy wrote, HAPPY BIRTHDAY PATTI & PENNY on one cake at the pastry shop. Birthday celebrated! Record from Mike and a powder puff from Pete. $25 Mom and Dad for Rondelet dress but will need twice that much. Still nice present though."

We didn't even keep Coca-Cola in the house, just Mom's diet drinks. When feasible, our mother would 'buy her way out' of the dessert arena; when I was in Cub Scouts, rather than host a meeting, Mom would provide the (store bought) cupcakes for the treats while other mothers hosted the meetings.

The one way we could earn a Coke was as a treat after a long morning of hoeing the weeds in Dad's 'Victory Garden.' Long before we got to Houston, back when we lived in Washington D.C., our father The Captain had a Victory Garden just a few miles away, a short drive. My sister Penny recalls that there were two such gardens in our military lives:

> There was a garden in DC and there was a garden at NOPI. We kids were active in both gardens. The DC garden was across the Potomac River at the Naval Receiving Station.[2]
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> The garden plot was alongside other family garden plots and we worked hard in the hot sun and were rewarded later in the wooden clubhouse with drinks. One time when we were driving very slowly on the dirt road away from the clubhouse, Patsy yelled, "Daddy, Michael just fell out of the car !"
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> The garden at NOPI was to the right as you walk out of the front door of Quarters A. It was a fenced in garden (chicken wire?) and to walk inside of it was scary because big potato bugs were lurking on the tall corn sheaves and tomatoes plants. I don't know who planted these gardens; I don't think it was our family but possibly other helpers.

Re my episode of 'falling out of the car.' Since our mother did not drive, when our father was away, it was public transportation or someone else's car. I clearly recall on some trip observing from the back seat when a man in the passenger seat would grab the door handle, and as we approached his drop-off destination in downtown Washington, he would 'open' (unlatch) the door in preparation, so when the car pulled up to the curb, he was all ready to disembark – the door ready to swing open. That impressed me and this was what I was experimenting with on

[2] This receiving station had opened at Anacostia in 1943, at what is now DC's Anacostia Park at the foot of the Frederick Douglass Bridge.

that fateful trip to our father's garden plot – but there, once I had the door unlatched, Dad swung the car around a curve, and centripetal force being what it is, out I swung, still holding onto the door handle until I had to let go. Thanks to Patsy, I was recovered! And chewed out just a bit. But I got my Coke early that day. Well worth a few scrapes, bruises, and admonishments.

In Houston, Mother's menus were supplemented by our maid, "Crazy Annie"[3] for awhile, then Bertha Bug. The maid would come on Saturday morning, clean all morning, and then fry up a big frying pan of fried chicken before she left. Good eatin'! The story was we lost Annie when she was found 'packing heat' as Pete described it, on a Houston city bus. There was no concealed carry law back in the 50s, and certainly not for colored folks. So after Annie was lost to law enforcement, we hired Bertha, who had a habit of taking some groceries home from the large pantry that existed under the stairs between the kitchen and the front door entryway. I recall when the government came out with a report that diet drink's sugar substitute saccharine had been known to cause cancer in rats and the FDA would be taking them off the shelf, Mother responded by hurrying out and purchasing and stockpiling all those diet drinks she could find.[4]

My sisters used to tell me that whoever married me would have an easy time of pleasing me with her cooking after my being raised on an almost pure diet of mother's casseroles. Over fifty years later, following Helen's death, two female members from my Lamar High School Class of 1959 (one a divorcée, one a widow) sat on either side of me during our Medicare Cruise (April 2006) to instruct and warn this newly minted widower against "women bearing casseroles."

The gals and I finally devised a scheme whereby I could install one of those prison food slots at the side of my front door at Stalgren Ct so the lady with the casserole could just slide it in without compromising my virtue. As it turned out, there was not as overwhelming a deluge of casseroles as we feared. And Bonnie doesn't cook that often. Penny reminds me:

> All siblings remember our upbringing differently because we are all different. I do remember lots of casseroles. Here are a few of my thoughts: Cottage cheese with jam preserves on top were piled on top of toast. Patti and I would come down to breakfast; Mother would have left this nutritious but cold breakfast for us. We choked it down and headed for the door.
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> The thing that stands out to me was Mother's stew which the siblings vociferously complained had way too much wheat germ in it. Mother said wheat germ contained vitamin B and was good for you. I began to call the stew "candy stew". for its gravy flavor.
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> "There, you see," said Mother. "Penny calls It candy stew." No more complaints.
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> My personal favorite was lamb chops. My personal unfavorite was liver, usually burned, and cow's tongue. YUK.
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> However after marriage and leaving home, I noticed in my diary I often had liver for dinner because I thought it was nutritious and learned to like it - but I didn't burn it.

[3] Pete tells the story of "Crazy Annie" in his stories under Chapter 11.

[4] 1969: The F.D.A. bans cyclamate when testing -much of which was done on sweeteners containing both saccharin and cyclamate -suggests that large doses cause bladder tumors in laboratory rats.